

THE WORD

Glenna Holloway

Dilly Morton was my best friend. We were so compatible-- almost able to read each other's minds-- both married a couple of years-- both holding part-time jobs. Now I had lost her.

It was my fault. Never mind that my intentions were the best. Never mind that ancient cliché, for her own good. I handled it wrong. My head swarmed with questions. How do you do it right? How do you undo the damage? Is it too late?

"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain." I had read it to Dilly. I read it again now, King James and Revised Standard versions. Plain. Simple. No loopholes.

Blasphemous profanity is everywhere. "My God" this, "my God" that. "God!" or "Jesus!" in assorted inflections have become the commonest comments of the workday. Little kids

say the same thing on the streets. You hear it so much it's hard not to pick it up like a parrot. It even shows up in comic strips. The holiest names on earth are reduced to a snort.

"I'm not talking about the real God when I use the word," Dilly insisted.

"But you don't have any other God," I said.

"Hey, last year was my 'good grief' year. I wore that out. And I feel like a nerd with 'gosh' and 'golly.' Besides, those are just euphemisms for God. Don't you know that?"

I did know it but I used them on occasion. Plus a few old fashioned cuss words that sound almost naive today. "So why do we have to use expletives at all? Why can't we--"

Dilly cut me off. "Look, speech patterns come and go with the times. Like quiche and wrinkled clothes. Next year it may be 'great Zeus.' Just a word. It's no big deal."

"But it is! That's just the point. It's one of the ten commandments! God told us it's important! Every time you say it it encourages somebody else to say it. I've caught myself about to say it."

She creased her mouth the way she does at Bill. I knew she was having problems in her marriage and was under pressure at the hospital where she works. My timing was

terrible. I came on too strong.

"Bug off, Betty. I told you I don't mean him," she gestured upward. "It's like an automatic reflex. Sometimes it's a way of letting off steam. What do you want me to say, 'Peter Rabbit?' I certainly don't want to offend Miss Lily Lips. Scheesh!"

She squealed her tires in my drive backing out to go to work. That was the last I'd seen of her. Three days ago.

I searched the scriptures. Was I picking the speck out of her eye and ignoring the woodpile in my own? Was I being holier than thou? Should I give up my friend before she caused me to stumble? I HAD come close to using the same words after being with her. Paul told his followers they SHOULD exhort each other.

I was miserable. I knew what my husband would say. We had talked about it before. Once in a while the "G" word slipped out of him, too. He was watching it but he made it plain he wasn't about to correct anyone else.

I had prayed, Lord, don't let me lose my friend. Make things like they were before. Make her see the light so we can be together. Lots of begging to keep the cake and eat it, too.

On the fourth day I wrote Dilly two notes and tore them up. That night I prayed a different prayer. It no longer had



anything to do with my side of it. It went something like, Lord, it's in your hands. Help us both. Forgive us both. I trust you. Whatever happens is your will and I bow to it.

Friday was my day off. That morning as my one-lung washer wheezed away, Dilly buzzed my back door.

"I knew you'd be washing now and wouldn't hear the front chime," she said as I opened up.

"I'm so glad you came by. The coffee pot just signaled ready."

We studied our cups a minute then both started at once. We stopped and grinned.

She began again slowly. "I, ah, just want to say thanks. You made me mad at first. But then-- hey, I don't know anybody else who cares enough about me to try to keep me from doing something wrong."

"Yeah, well, I was about as tactful as a jackhammer, I'm afraid. I'm sorry."

"I don't know how else you'd have done it. Pussyfooting wouldn't get it. It's a habit. A bad one. You'll have to help me break it."

"If you'll help me stop saying the silly cop-out words that mean the same thing. Actually, you had a great idea for making the transition to unembellished sentences."

"What idea?"

I raised my coffee mug. "Here's to Peter Rabbit."

"You actually expect to vent your spleen with that?"

"I'm gonna try."

"If I tell you your washer just shredded all your sheets, you're gonna say Peter Rabbit?"

"You can put a lot into it with the proper tone, y' know. That's the secret. Maybe a jaw clench, a higher note."

She stared a moment, shaking her head, returning my grin.

On her way out, in a voice loaded with gut feeling, she said, "Peter Rabbit!"